Office of the President

“Intellect Is Not Wisdom,” Convocation, September 2021

September 1, 2021

Welcome to Middlebury. You’ve had a whole week of college life behind you. You’ve met some people. You know a few buildings. You’ve got some mental maps to follow. And this ceremony tonight is another kind of mental map—a map of wisdom. The little book that we’ve given you, with sayings—we give that to students every year, and we want you to keep it with you. You can return to it again and again when you are in need of wisdom, when you are in need of lenses to help you to see better.

As a college student, you become wise. You learn that wisdom is more than just knowledge. It is using that knowledge in the right way, understanding information and how it can be used for good in the world.

In your booklet, Lenji the Zen master writes that the beginning of wisdom is students having faith in themselves. So let’s start there. Everyone at Middlebury is as talented as you are, but in a different way. And that can be exhilarating, but it can also be disorienting and discouraging. People already know staggering amounts about subjects you’ve never heard of, lived in places that you barely recognize on a map, competed in athletic contests you didn’t even know existed. And maybe you’ve met those people that Nicole just talked about—the novelist, three-sport varsity athlete who started her own NGO and hiked the Appalachian trail solo. And the most annoying thing was, as you’ve probably already discovered, she was really nice, too.
That’s the Middlebury way.

But no matter how accomplished everyone at Middlebury is, know that intellect and accomplishment are not wisdom. Wisdom is not knowing or achieving a lot, but knowing and achieving your own truth. So this is the first part about becoming wise: your job is not to be like others. Your job is to be like yourself. So I ask you now, and I will never tire of asking you throughout your time here: how long are you going to worry, like some of you are right now, sitting in those benches and listening to us? How long are you going to worry about who you are not, when you should be getting on with the glorious business of being who you are? Your job at Middlebury is to become more like yourself—whoever that person is and wherever that person takes us and our community.

Once you've stopped comparing yourself to everyone else, then you can go on to the second part of wisdom: understanding that you are Middlebury; you belong here. You belong here because you have the creativity, and drive, and grit that is characteristic of the people who come here. You've come after a global disruption that we have not seen in a century. You come after COVID 1, and in the midst of COVID 2.0. You may not have experienced the give-and-take of an in-person classroom. You may not know the rules of engagement with professors, except online. You might feel rusty in your critical thinking skills—the very things you wanted to come to Midd to develop. You might be anxious about your social skills—an integral part of the college experience, yes, but not your college experience yet.

Even as you start college, the next major stage of your life, you might still be processing losses in your families from last year: loss of a loved one, of a job, of a dream. There are a myriad of ways, stated and unstated, that you are different than students have been before. It is our job to listen, to pause, to take the time to understand what experiences you are bringing with you. Our classrooms are your first communities since the pandemic. We welcome you into them, and ask you to evolve with us, into a wider Middlebury, one that incorporates all that we have learned from the challenges of the last year.

As you explore, remember that part of wisdom is having the courage to ask for help. It is a good thing to do so. A really good thing. You need friends, and family, and advisors, and professors, and classmates, and coaches, and librarians, and COMPASS mentors, and townspeople you met on a project, and teammates, to help you keep going. At Middlebury, we expect you to be brave enough to ask for help. You need what I call "local courage" to connect with others and learn from them so that you yourself can thrive. You are coming into a community that will help you—even as

they travel on their own journeys. Last year, Middlebury students ranked others' health above their own. That's one among many examples you'll find of how Middlebury people step up for the people around them.

I usually share with the incoming class notes from the summer to tell you exactly what kind of extraordinary community you are coming into. And I will do so today. Here is just a small sample of how we've been doing from over this past summer: In July, we celebrated the start of production of renewable energy at the largest anaerobic digester in the Northeast, right here in Addison County. It's the culmination of a historic partnership between Middlebury, a local family dairy farm, and regional utility and renewable energy companies—and the execution of a vision conjured by Middlebury students, faculty, and staff, right here on campus a decade ago. From concept to practice, this germ of an idea is now a community reality that greatly advances this institution's commitment to rely solely on renewable energy sources by 2028.

Middlebury undergraduate students in architecture courses are designing houses—not as theoretical exercises but in practice, partnering with Habitat for Humanity of Addison County to design and help craft homes for local families. Their exquisite work can be found here in Middlebury and in neighboring Vergennes, expressions of community built on those values of respect, curiosity, integrity, connectedness, and openness.

In Monterey, at the Middlebury Institute, where I hope many of you study, researchers and scholars working side-by-side with students at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies are using open-source intelligence to challenge efforts by nations around the globe to conceal or exaggerate nuclear capabilities. It seems not a week goes by that these experts, our experts, are not written about in major magazines or quoted in international media outlets. Read the August 7 edition of the Economist. Your professors in Monterey are the major story. They are just one slice of our community of global scholars and learners and doers in California.

This fall, I eagerly await reports from our students who spent the summer engaged with work funded by Projects for Peace grants. Senior Febs Alexandra Burns and Olivia O'Brien led a cohort of six Middlebury peers in travel to Colorado and Texas, where they collaborated with nonprofit organizations to explore humane alternatives to immigrant detention, while junior Hieu Nguyen worked to expand a letter-writing project between youth and teens in Vermont and his native

Vietnam to a series of countries, including Kenya, Uganda, Armenia, and Eswatini. Community in action.

Those are just a few of our stories from the past weeks. Our future weeks' stories should be equally inspiring—and not because of the individual accomplishments, but because of the extraordinary, unique collaboration that helped those individuals to thrive.

But there is another story from the summer—one I believe is as inspiring as it is dramatic, and quintessentially Middlebury. If you've turned on the news even once in the past month and a half, you would know about the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the swift Taliban takeover of the country, and the chaos that erupted as many American and Afghani citizens feared for their lives and tried to escape.

Much of our August was spent working with two extraordinary Afghani Middlebury alumni and helping them to make a dangerous journey out of Kabul into exile—with only a few days' notice and, in one case, an afternoon's notice. Shabana Basij-Rasikh, Class of 2011, is founder of SOLA, the first boarding school for girls in Afghanistan. She brought 140 women—faculty, staff, and students—to the airport and to Doha, Qatar. From Doha she brought them to Kigali, Rwanda, where they are now pursuing study abroad as an entire school. As she had stated in her public writings during and since her escape, the uninterrupted education of women is one of the most important forms of resistance that can occur right now. She is teaching wisdom to the world.

Her fellow Middlebury alum, Bilal Sarwary '10, also made a harrowing escape, from Kabul to Doha to Canada, where he arrived last week and is still in quarantine. Bilal is an Afghani citizen, a freelance, high-profile, pro-democracy journalist who also ran for a seat in the now-defunct Afghan parliament in a conservative, Al-Qaeda–dominated province. As an Afghan, he was low on the American list of potential evacuees. As a freelance journalist, he was not an official employee of any media company, and therefore low on all of their lists, too. And yet he was higher profile than many on those lists, having collaborated with many pro-democracy activists and written for and given interviews for CNN, NPR, ABC, BBC, Al-Jazeera. So: Bilal had no country. He had no company. He had Middlebury. And he had wisdom.

There are many other Afghani Middlebury alums that we are in touch with, all of them doing brave and important work. Yet it is worth noting in these two examples that both of these young people

—one creating the first girls' school in all Afghanistan, and the other relentlessly exercising his right to free expression on behalf of a democratic, equitable, and just Afghanistan—showed extraordinary courage in the last 10 years as they tried to build their country. Because of that courage, both of them were high-profile targets for the Taliban.

Let me give you further examples from their story.

The most dangerous part of Bilal Sarwary's journey was not the flight out of Kabul. It was not being at the chaotic airport. It was getting to the airport. Early on I asked him, "How far are you away from the airport?" And he replied, "About three minutes. But I know I won't be able to get there if people see me."

For three nights I was in touch with the heads of almost every major news organization in the U.S. and their staff. Everyone knew Bilal, and some had even recently interviewed him. They knew the quality of his work. Because he learned to write at Middlebury, he became one of the best young journalists in Afghanistan as a result. But the wealth of all of these organizations, and his reputation, and even his most recent appearances on those channels, could not make him a priority for their evacuation plans, because he was not an employee. Here in Vermont, we thought about every option to get him to the airport—of helicopters, of underground tunnels. We thought of helping him to go in disguise, but Bilal did not have time to change his papers, and they would have given him away. He was just too high profile.

Instead, Bilal used wisdom—his connections with other reporters on the ground who knew people from the nation of Qatar. All throughout August, the Qataris had been quietly organizing protected convoys of Afghani citizens and some Americans to get to the airport. In some cases, the Qatari ambassador used his own military protection and security guard to create safe passage to the airport. In other cases, the Qataris used moderate Taliban escorts to protect the convoys. Finally, Bilal was able to land a place on one of those convoys. We were texting with him every yard of that dangerous journey, as he was escorted by the Taliban, the very group he was trying to escape.

The reading from Proverbs that we heard just now stated that wisdom is better than silver or gold, worth more than the gems of trade. We could take this to mean that it's better to have a meaningful life than a wealthy life. And that would be true, and something we want you to

remember. At Middlebury, you will get an education that will help you live a meaningful life, no matter what your salary is. But Bilal's story shows us something more. He had the wisdom to know that friendship, not power, that connections on the ground, not highly resourced news outfits, would save his life.

In another reading you heard tonight, the Gita tells us that wisdom comes from controlling the senses, and being filled with trust. That being wise begins with discipline, and Middlebury will ask that of you. That's the rigor that we're known for and that we know you already have. But it's more than that. Shabana Bisaj-Rasikh knows this well. She had less than a day to move 140 women, staff, and faculty out of their homes and to the airport. She had the discipline to plan. Even when those around her and those in the United States told her that Kabul wouldn't fall, she thought ahead.

To take one poignant example: Shabana knew that, once they arrived at her school, the Taliban would find student records, and find student families from their addresses. So even though it was heartbreaking, she knew that, if the moment came, she would destroy the records of the entire school to keep the girls and their families safe. And the moment did come. Shabana also knew that the documents could not be burnt, because the smoke would show her location, attract attention, and create suspicion. So she had another plan. She used acid.

And when in early August Shabana got a phone call—"The Taliban are 10 minutes away"—she knew she had to leave instantly. And take her school with her. Many of them left in full burqa, or head-to-toe covering. The very thing that they had been fighting against as women, insisting on their right to an education and to move about in public, was used as a key form of disguise as they made their escape. Shabana had discipline and control, the foresight to plan.

In the reading from the New Testament tonight, James tells us that wisdom is "filled with mercy and with good fruits. It is not divided." Shabana's efforts to get the school to safety did not end with the destruction of the records. Later that day and the next, most of the SOLA women had been able to get inside the airport. In fact, it was miraculous that they had all reached the airport at all. But there were some stuck outside the gate. More than 50 of them, in fact. Shabana had promised every one that they would make it, and she could not let them down. Earlier, she had befriended a U.S. Marine inside the airport and happened to see him as she thought desperately about how to get the Taliban guard to allow these women to come in with her. When the Marine

understood her predicament, and because of their spontaneous friendship of only a day, he found a way to go to the right gate and persuade the right people to allow those 50 women in. Wisdom is not divided, says James, and Shabana would not let her women be divided. She was guided by the wise determination that all women from SOLA should stay together.

In your readings for tonight, the Quran states that God “gives wisdom to whomever He will.” Certainly, whatever religion you are part of, or none, we can agree that it was given to these two extraordinary young people—who graduated only 10 years ago.

And here’s the most important thing of all. Shabana’s and Bilal’s stories of escape would be just one among many that we have seen and heard about on the news in the last month. Except for one thing. They both credit their Middlebury graduation and education with giving them the wisdom and courage to do what they did in an extreme situation. To be sure, they already had the kind of character that they have shown in the past month as the Taliban took over their country. But that character, those principles, were shaped, and deepened, here, at Middlebury, where you are now.

Middlebury gave them the relationships to keep them going. Trustees from Pakistan from the media, faculty with contacts in the Middle East, deans with contacts in the U.S. government, fellow students and staff, all came together to get them out.

Most importantly, their classes at Middlebury gave them the long view of history, and of politics, and of religion. It gave them the critical thinking skills to question, to probe, and to build. It gave them a sense of justice, and fair process, and the need for access to knowledge for all—whether through education or media. The relationships they built and ideas they encountered here were models for them as they moved out into the world—a world far more dangerous than the one we occupy in Middlebury, Vermont. In other words, they didn’t just gain knowledge here; they gained wisdom, and even courage.

Middlebury, the community, gave them that courage. And we may not have even known we were doing it. Bilal and Shabana’s lives were in danger because they continued to stand for their principles—principles they learned here. Middlebury literally gave them heart. And Middlebury will do it again, this year, for you, our first-year students.

I sent Bilal a picture of Middlebury every day that he was trying to flee from danger. He wrote back:

Middlebury is my second home. Middlebury's training helped me make a name for myself in the world. I am overwhelmed by its kindness and I am trying to reach my mother of knowledge and her city as soon as possible.

During those most dangerous hours, and even in the second-by-second hair-raising drive through Kabul to the airport, Bilal took comfort from the pictures of the Vermont mountains all around us now, because that is where he found his intellectual and spiritual home. This is the essence of a 21st-century Middlebury education: to encourage, to give heart. Bilal and Shabana found their wisdom and courage here. And so will you. Thank you.

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Office Hours - Spring 2023
Friday, March 31 from 1:00-2:30 p.m.
Wednesday, April 26 from 2:00-3:30 p.m.
Monday, May 15 from 4:00-5:30 p.m.